

Rudolf Serkin was born in Eger, Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Cheb, Czech Republic), to a Russian Jewish family. His father, Mordko Serkin, "had been a Russian basso, and taught him to read music before he could read words."

Hailed as a child prodigy, [citation needed] he was sent to Vienna at the age of 9, where he studied piano with Richard Robert and, later, composition with Joseph Marx, making his public debut with the Vienna Philharmonic at 12. From 1918 to 1920 he studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg and participated actively in Schoenberg's Society for the Private Performance of Music. He began a regular concert career in 1920, living in Berlin with the German violinist Adolf Busch and his family, which included a then-3-year-old daughter Irene, whom Serkin would marry 15 years later.

In 1921, at age 17, he made his Berlin debut performing in Mr Busch's ensemble as the keyboard soloist in the Brandenburg Concerto no. 5. At the end of the concert, Busch told Serkin to play an encore to the enthusiastic audience. Serkin later reported that he asked Busch, "What shall I play?" and Busch "as a joke" told him to play the Goldberg Variations "and I took him seriously. When I finished there were only four people left: Adolf Busch, Artur Schnabel, Alfred Einstein and me."

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Serkin performed throughout Europe both as soloist and with Busch and the Busch Quartet. With the rise of Hitler in Germany in 1933, Serkin and the Busches (who were not Jewish but who vehemently opposed the Nazi regime) left Berlin for Basel, Switzerland.

In 1933, Serkin made his first United States appearance at the Coolidge Festival in Washington, D.C., where he performed with Adolf Busch. In 1936, he launched his solo concert career in the USA with the New York Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini. The critics raved, describing him as "an artist of unusual and impressive talents in possession of a crystalline technique, plenty of power, delicacy, and tonal purity." In 1937, Serkin played his first New York recital at Carnegie Hall.

Immigration to the United States

Shortly after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the Serkins and Busches immigrated to the United States, where Serkin taught several generations of pianists at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. From 1968 to 1976 he served as the Institute's director. He lived with his growing family, first in New York, then in Philadelphia, as well as on a dairy farm in rural Guilford, Vermont. In 1951, Serkin and Adolf Busch founded the Marlboro Music School and Festival in Marlboro, Vermont, with the goal of stimulating interest in and performance of chamber music in the United States. He made numerous recordings from the 1940s into the 1980s, including one at RCA Victor of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in 1944, with the NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Toscanini. Most of his recordings were made for Columbia Masterworks, although in the 1980s he also recorded for Deutsche Grammophon and Telarc. Serkin admired the music of Max Reger, which he discovered while working with Adolf Busch. In 1959, he became the first pianist in the United States to record Reger's Piano Concerto, Op. 114, with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Serkin was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963 and in March 1972 celebrated his 100th appearance with the New York Philharmonic by playing Johannes Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1. The orchestra and board of directors also named Serkin an honorary member of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society, a distinction also conferred on Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, and Paul Hindemith. In 1986, he celebrated his 50th anniversary as a guest artist with the orchestra. He is also regarded as one of the primary interpreters of the music of Beethoven in the 20th century.

Revered as a musician's musician, a father figure to a legion of younger players who came to the Marlboro School and Festival, and a pianist of enormous musical integrity, he toured all over the world and continued his solo career and recording activities until illness prevented further work in 1989. He died of cancer on 8 May 1991, aged 88, at home on his Guilford farm.



Mendelssohn

Piano Concerto No. 1

Rudolf Serkin, piano

Incidental Music To "A Midsummer Night's Dream"
The Philadelphia Orchestra - Eugene Ormandy



Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25, was written in 1830–31, around the same time as his fourth symphony ("Italian"), and premiered in Munich in October 1831. This concerto was composed during a travel in Italy after the composer met a pianist in Munich.

He had already written a piano concerto in A minor with string accompaniment (1822) and two concertos with two pianos (1823–24).

The three connected movements use several relatively new formal techniques in their brief span for example, the piano enters very soon after the opening of the first movement, with little of an orchestral tutti to contrast with. The concerto quickly obtained popularity, and contains many sections of improvisation, one of Mendelssohn's specialities; it is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings.

Molto allegro con fuoco

The piano enters after only a few bars of orchestral introduction. It was standard procedure in the classical-era concerto to precede the solo's entrance by a tutti, for various reasons – the length and purpose of these introductions differed, some offering a hint of what was to follow and some giving out almost all the movement's material, but none was so brief as this: in this sense, this was one of the first concertos of the Romantic age. (The obvious exceptions – Mozart's Jeunehomme concerto and Beethoven's fourth and fifth piano concertos – allowed the piano to enter very briefly just at the start, but then proceeded as usual, the soloist silent.) The rest of the movement is fairly typical of concertos in its use of a modified sonata form, with a second, contrasting lyrical theme first heard from the piano over repeated accompaniment, and later on wind. As the movement closes a transition takes the movement not to a full close, but instead, with a brass fanfare and a piano continuation of the same, to the border of the Andante.

Andante

This opens with a melody in the lower strings, in E major, soon taken up by the piano. This is drawn out with breadth, and a middle section in C provides contrast. The original melody, somewhat varied, returns to close the movement.

Presto—Molto allegro e vivace

This opens with a fanfare in A minor (Presto). The piano joins in, at which point the mood lightens, and the closing rondo – Molto allegro e vivace – begins. This is regular in form, and the returns of the refrain are varied. Several themes from the first movement return towards the finale.

Mendelssohn wrote the incidental music, Op. 61, for A Midsummer Night's Dream in 1842, 16 years after he wrote the Overture. It was written to a commission from King Frederick William IV of Prussia. Mendelssohn was by then the music director of the King's Academy of the Arts and of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. A successful presentation of Sophocles' Antigone on 28 October 1841 at the New Palace in Potsdam, with music by Mendelssohn (Op. 55) led to the King asking him for more such music, to plays he especially enjoyed. A Midsummer Night's Dream was produced on 14 October 1843, also at Potsdam. The producer was Ludwig Tieck. This was followed by incidental music for Sophocles' Oedipus (Potsdam, 1 November 1845; published posthumously as Op. 93) and Jean Racine's Athalie (Berlin, 1 December 1845; Op. 74).

The A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture, Op. 21, originally written as an independent piece 16 years earlier, was incorporated into the Op. 61 incidental music as its overture, and the first of its 14 numbers. There are also vocal sections and other purely instrumental movements, including the Scherzo, Nocturne and Wedding March. The vocal numbers include the song "Ye spotted snakes" and the melodramas "Over hill, over dale", "The Spells", "What hempen homespuns", and "The Removal of the Spells". The melodramas served to enhance Shakespeare's text.

Act I was played without music. The Scherzo, with its sprightly scoring, dominated by chattering winds and dancing strings, acts as an intermezzo between Acts I and II. The Scherzo leads directly into the first melodrama, a passage of text spoken over music. Oberon's arrival is accompanied by a fairy march, scored with triangle and cymbals.

The vocal piece "Ye spotted snakes" opens Act II's second scene. The second Intermezzo comes at the end of the second act. Act III includes a quaint march for the entrance of the Mechanicals. We soon hear music quoted from the Overture to accompany the action. The Nocturne includes a solo horn doubled by bassoons, and accompanies the sleeping lovers between Acts III and IV. There is only one melodrama in Act IV. This closes with a reprise of the Nocturne to accompany the mortal lovers' sleep.

The intermezzo between Acts IV and V is the famous Wedding March, probably the most popular single piece of music composed by Mendelssohn, and one of the most ubiquitous pieces of music ever written.

Act V contains more music than any other, to accompany the wedding feast. There is a brief fanfare for trumpets and timpani, a parody of a funeral march, and a Bergomask dance. The dance uses Bottom's braying from the Overture as its main thematic material.

The play has three brief epilogues. The first is introduced with a reprise of the theme of the Wedding March and the fairy music of the Overture. After Puck's speech, the final musical number is heard – "Through this house give glimmering light", scored for soprano, mezzo-soprano and chorus. Puck's famous valedictory speech "If we shadows have offended" is accompanied, as day breaks, by the four chords first heard at the very beginning of the Overture, bringing the work full circle and to a fitting close.

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Concerto No. 1 In G Minor For Piano And Orchestra, Op. 25 19:19

1. Molto Allegro Con Fuoco 7:06

2. Presto 6:13

3. Molto Allegro E Vivace 6:08

Incidental Music To "A Midsummer Night's Dream" 28:32

4. Overture 12:30

5. Scherzo 4:33

6. Nocturne 6:18

7. Wedding March 4:56

Total Time 47:51

Piano Concerto Recorded 1960 by Columbia records

Transferred from a 2-track tape

Midsummer Nights Dream recorded 1964 by Columbia records

Transferred from a 4-track tape

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